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JACK ANDERSON and DALE VAN ATTA

Honduras, an Ally Left Out in the Cold

The United States is clearly not suited to the role of an imperial power along the lines of the Soviet Union or the old British Empire. When Moscow lays down the official line, there are no deviations by the satellite nations; but U.S. client states exercise their right to dissent as vociferously as if they were at a Democratic National Convention.

Last week's dust-up over the reported Nicaraguan invasion of Honduras was an embarrassing case in point. The initial reaction of Honduran leaders was that the invasion was mostly Reagan administration propaganda to win congressional support for \$100 million in new aid for the rebels, or contras, fighting the government of Nicaragua.

Only after President Reagan announced \$20 million in emergency aid to Honduras did Honduran officials agree with the White House version of events.

The momentary embarrassment, unfortunately, was only a reflection of a more serious problem: an appalling breakdown in communications between the U.S. and Honduran governments, caused in large part by U.S. insensitivity toward a supposedly valuable ally. Even though a high State Department official was on the scene, the U.S. government didn't take Honduran officials into its confidence.

The Hondurans were apparently expected to parrot the U.S. line without even knowing what the United States is trying to achieve in Central America. Our reporter Jon Lee Anderson talked with Honduran officials in Tegucigalpa recently. Here is what one of them said:

"We have the impression that the United States doesn't know what to do in Nicaragua. It is taking actions that don't hurt the Sandinistas, but which hurt its allies a lot—for example, Honduras and Costa Rica. The U.S. policy on the contras is very confusing; the Reagan administration calls for covert aid, which is then discussed openly. Then it calls for humanitarian aid and assistance, but they give the contras not only food, clothing and medicine, but also boots for marching in the jungle."

The Hondurans have no affection for the Sandinista troublemakers in Managua. But they want to avoid the long-term presence of Nicaraguan contras in their territory.

"The ideal thing would be to seek the exit of these people from our country," a Honduran foreign ministry official said. "They are hurting us, and that damage is not being compensated by what they are accomplishing. I don't think it's money the [Honduran] government wants. But it would like to be allowed to take more of an initiative. The initiative, for example, to say whether it wants the contras or not."

One U.S. official said: "The contra policy has been one disaster after the other, and the Hondurans know it. They would like to have a role. They feel they have enough knowledge and experience to help out, but we've never taken them into account."

As last week's fiasco showed, we don't even share our intelligence on what is happening in their own country. "The problem," said the diplomat, "is that we don't care about Honduras."